

2024, Hot summer morning at the german french border:

With two days of traveling behind me, I finally arrive at the lock where I want to attempt to hitchhike barges to the rhine. After using about all of my french vocabulary to shout my intent to the lock keeper who sits high up in the watchtower. He replies: "c'est bon!, le next bateau will be here in about... ten heures!"

Uff, this might be harder than I thought.

Some wisdom I learned from an old sailor years ago pops back into my mind. "The one who does not haste always has perfect wind." I take that to be the motto of the day and after many sunny hours, hitching a few locks with a yacht and dumpsterdiving some great figs, the barge finally shows up. The bargepeople invite me on board with a handshake and the words: "You can come with us, but if you make trouble we will throw you overboard!" Okay, I desperatley need to wash myself anyways so it's a win in any case. Let's see how far we can get.

Out of all the rides one can hitch, river barges are probably among the slowest. If you want to cover distance fast, you are better off hitching cars. But If you want to take a break from speed, just find yourself tired of walking or cycling and next to a water lock, or if you want to see things from a different perspective, hitching barges might be the way to go.

I could not find much information on this online, so I have compiled my research and my few experiments into this small zine. Not because I am such an expert, but more to spread the idea that this is actually an option.

Barge: a long flat-bottomed boat for carrying freight on canals and rivers.

Lock: a short section of a canal with gates at each end which can be opened or closed to raise and lower boats.

As far as I have understood, hitchhiking barges can work in 3 ways, out of which I have attempted one successfully.

The method I prefer and which is most similar to common hitchhiking is to go to a lock and communicate your intent to the lock keeper, so they can put in a word for you when the barge contacts them for passage. It is really useful if they help you out with this because when the barge arrives they will be busy mooring the ship and won't have much time to talk to you. Since 9-11 many locks have been fenced off, so its tricky to reach the barge without consent of the lock keeper. A lot of locks nowadays are remote controlled. They should still have a phone number to contact or a doorbell at the main gate, but I would prefer a lock without remote control. At locks you might also encounter other types of boats willing to take you, like river cruises and yachts. Alternatively, you can try posting an advert in the schuttevaer, binnenvaartkrant or other barging related newspaper. Social media might also be an option. Although I generally like the first option best, not all rivers are canalized like the rhine for example, which is the river with the highest traffic in Europe. While you are at it you can also try hitching yachts from yacht harbors, many tows also have a quay for yachts and the like to dock for a night. Sticking my thumb out to a passing yacht has also worked already. Yacht people can be really nice, not all of them are rich snobs, but one can tell from looking at their boat. I would not suggest attempting to contact barges in the harbor because they are usually closed off.

Barges can be run in different ways, some are privately owned and run by familie's transporting all over europe. Others could be part of a company and travel the same stretch over and over. This means that you are potentially entering peoples private home and life. Be a bit aware of this and maybe take a swim to wash off that crust. On barges you are legally not allowed to do anything without the right paperwork. This can be a blessing and a curse. For me it was the closest to a cruise I am likely to get in my life, after one and a half days of watching the towns drift slowly by, I was begging to at least do the dishes.

Although not all ships are shown, you can use a live ship tracker to see if any boats are coming or to estimate the traffic a stretch of water. At koblenz, where the mosel connects to the rhine, there is a lock where all passing barges have to show some kind of paperwork. This means they have to be there for a bit longer. That could be a good chance to talk to them and get a ride on the rhine. It used to be more common, but since corona, digitization has caught up. At nighttime some barges might dock at the island which the lock is part of. It is a really nice camping spot since it is generally closed off to the public. The code trough the fence on the road bridge is 2680. Don't tell them you got it from me. "The gate was just open".

If you have any dietary preferences it's smart to bring some food, since you will not be able to get anything that was not already on board.

Some useful links:

- <https://inland-navigation-market.org/chapitre/2-freight-transport-on-inland-waterways-3/?lang=en>
- <https://www.marinetraffic.com/en/ais/home/shipid:239617/zoom:15>
- <https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/info/Flusstrampen-Daumen-raus-an-der-Schleuse,audio1603258.html>
- https://hitchwiki.org/en/Hitchhiking_a_boat

River / Canal	Connecting cities	Lock quantity 1-5	Transport performance billion Tonne-kilometre 0-60	Prettiness 1-5
Weser	Hannover - Bremen	4	3	2 flatlands, lots of canal
Main	Frankfurt - Nuremberg	5	3	3
Mosel	Strasbourg - Trier	5	3	5
Danube	<-Regensburg - Vienna ->	4	40	3/4
Elbe	Dresden - Hamburg	0	1.7	3 free flow
Neckar	Stuttgart - Manheim	4	60	4
Rhine	Rotterdam - Basel	0 last lock at Iffezheim	60	- too big to judge

